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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BISHKEK 000614

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SUBJECT: KYRGYZSTAN HONORS AUTHOR CHINGIZ AITMATOV WITH
STATE FUNERAL

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Classified By: CDA Lee Litzenberger, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Kyrgyzstan held its first-ever state funeral on June 14 in honor of author and statesman Chingiz Aitmatov, who died in Germany on June 11 at age 79. Aitmatov's fame extended across the then-Soviet space and the Turkic world, and delegations representing both regions eulogized the author. In Kyrgyzstan, Aitmatov was revered for bringing Kyrgyz culture to the world stage. Charge attended the day-long ceremonies, which reflected Kyrgyz nomadic tradition, Muslim custom, and post-Soviet statism in the unique mixture that defines current Kyrgyz identity. End Summary.

A Soviet and Central Asian Icon

¶2. (C) In keeping with Kyrgyz nomadic custom, the burial took place three days after death, instead of within 24 hours as is customary in most Muslim countries. The additional time, the tradition goes, allows family members who may be in distant pastures to travel and gather for the event. The June 14 ceremonies began at the National Philharmonic Center in downtown Bishkek, where Aitmatov lay in state. Among the VIP mourners were special delegations from Russia (Minister of Culture Avdeev), Turkey (State Secretary Essen), Kazakhstan (State Secretary Saudabayev and writer Mukhtar Shakhnov), Azerbaijan (Minister of Culture Garayev), Tajikistan (Minister of Culture Asori) and Tatarstan (State Advisor to the President -- Aitmatov's mother was Tatar), as well as the diplomatic corps.

Why can't women attend the funeral?

¶3. (C) On arrival at the Philharmonia, Charge and diplomatic colleagues were escorted through the throng of thousands of Kyrgyz citizens waiting outside to pay their respects and into a holding room inside. It was explained that they would be invited to view the open coffin at some

point later in the morning; the total time spent at the Philharmonia would depend on how many Kyrgyz citizens showed up. Inside the waiting room were many ministers, including the Foreign Minister and all three of his deputies, a handful of parliamentarians, and other prominent Kyrgyz. After conveying condolences, Charge was able to chat usefully with many of them, all of whom noted that there had never been an event such as this since Kyrgyz independence 16 years ago. MP and former FM Rosa Otunbayeva, dressed in traditional Kyrgyz costume, was particularly distraught. Having worked with Aitmatov from the time he was Soviet Ambassador to Luxembourg, she clearly felt a deep loss at his passing. She also complained bitterly to the Charge that, as a woman, she would not be allowed to attend the funeral later in the day.

14. (C) In due time, the diplomatic corps was called up to pay respects to Aitmatov and his family. Protocol staff allowed groups of five to ten VIPs at a time go forward, alternating them with groups of Kyrgyz citizens who had been standing in line. Following a brief moment in front of the open casket, and an opportunity to express condolences to Aitmatov's oldest son, diplomats were ushered back into the holding room. After approximately three hours in the waiting area, the group proceeded to the next step: the public eulogies out in front of the Philharmonic building.

Pomp and Ceremony

15. (C) Before thousands of assembled Kyrgyz, under special tents for Kyrgyz President Bakiyev, the visiting delegations and Aitmatov's family, Bakiyev and the heads of each visiting delegation addressed the crowd in Kyrgyz, Russian, Turkish,

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and Kazakh. Aitmatov's now closed and flag-draped coffin rested on a platform on stage; an honor guard of Kyrgyz soldiers in dress uniform stood at attention in front. The Russian Minister of Culture recalled when, in Soviet times, "we were all one people;" the Turkish State Secretary announced that a university in Turkey would be named after Aitmatov. For the diplomatic corps, who were directed just outside the building, but behind the speakers area, it was difficult to see the stage, and after the first few speeches the group broke into small groups to talk. At one point, the Charge was approached by a Kyrgyz man who proceeded to explain the symbolism associated with the shape and design of the tall white kolpaks, or traditional Kyrgyz hat, that were ubiquitous in the crowd as a sign of respect for the deceased.

Soviet School Uniforms

16. (C) After the eulogizing, military pallbearers carried Aitmatov's body down the main street, Chui prospect, to the central Ala Too square. The diplomatic corps, however, was herded into minivans for the 25 kilometer drive to the Ata-Beyit (Father's Graveyard) burial site south of town, in the foothills of the Tien Shan mountains that dominate Bishkek's southern skyline. Along the entire route, police were posted every 50 meters, and as the motorcade passed through the villages near the burial site, the streets were lined with high school students decked out in old Soviet school uniforms of black pants and skirts and white shirts.

In Stalin's Shadow

17. (C) The Ait Beyit burial site is host to a moving monument to some 150 Kyrgyz intellectuals and leaders who were shot in 1938 during a Stalinist purge. Among the martyred was Chingiz Aitmatov's father, who was executed for being an enemy of the state and a pan-Turkist. Aitmatov had asked to be buried next to his father. The site has a commanding view of the Chui valley. While waiting for the

motorcade with the casket to arrive, and in part to escape the blistering sun and 100 degree temperatures, the Charge, most other western diplomats, and several of the MFA protocol staff toured the small but stirring museum. The Russian delegation stayed far away.

The Burial

17. (C) At one edge of the monument grounds, a large grave had been dug, with dirt mounded around it. Nearby was a ceremonial yurt for Aitmatov's male relatives, and an awning for President Bakiyev and the visiting delegations. Further off on the grass (and in the sun) were chairs for the diplomatic corps. While there were a handful of women present, the growing Kyrgyz crowd was virtually all male. Shortly before the motorcade with the casket arrived, President Bakiyev, his staff, the Governors of Chui and Issyk-Kul oblasts, the Minister of Interior and other dignitaries arrived, along with some two dozen members of parliament. When the casket arrived, an honor guard carried it to the grave and set it down. The mufti, who was standing among some two dozen men who had assembled around the grave, bent over and opened the coffin. Consistent with Muslim tradition, the body was to be buried wrapped only in a white sheet.

A Quintessential Kyrgyz Moment

18. (C) At this point, the relatively high degree of organization that had marked the day's ceremonies dissolved

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into mild pandemonium. It was clear no one had rehearsed, or considered, how to remove the body in a dignified manner, lower it into the trench and place it in the burial chamber hollowed out to one side. Other onlookers pushed forward and onto the mound of dirt surrounding the grave and people were rushing back and forth. The mufti and others tugged at the body and struggled to pass it down to a man in the trench. People began shouting ideas and commands to each other, and at one point the mufti stood on the mound like a general before his troops and directed the operation with gesticulations and prodding. In a few minutes, calm was restored and the body presumably was safely placed in the side chamber, which was then bricked up in short order. At this point, the assembled Kyrgyz government officials and the diplomatic corps were allowed to approach the grave and throw a symbolic fistful of dirt into buckets borne by militia troops. As buckets were filled, they were emptied into the grave. A few hundred other relatives and onlookers followed, and then a dozen or so workmen, spelled by militia troops, used shovels to fill in the rest. At one point, and on no particular cue, the assembled crowd was startled by gunshots -- a twenty one gun salute from the militia. The mufti read from the Koran and said prayers. Militia troops then filed by, stacking hundreds of wreaths around and on top of the mound. The funeral was over.

And now for the meal(

19. (C) Next stop for the VIP group was the President's Ala Archa compound, for lunch. The fact that it was nearly 5:00 p.m. before the group arrived at the compound was irrelevant.

Everyone was fatigued from the sun and heat (the VIP minivans were not air conditioned), and the cool basement room selected for the luncheon was a welcome haven. Seating at the two dozen round tables was designated for the visiting delegations, President Bakiyev and his cabinet only. The rest was a free for all. The Charge (along with the Chinese Ambassador) secured a seat at the table with all three Deputy Foreign Ministers; the Russian Ambassador (who was oddly not included with the Minister of Culture) jockeyed for the same table but just missed the last seat, and was relegated to a

table without any Kyrgyz officials.

¶10. (C) The meal began with Russian salads, then soup and ended with traditional Kyrgyz horse. As this was a VIP event, each plate received a large 4-5 pound chunk of meat, bone and prized fat, along with a hearty helping of horsemeat and noodle casserole. The Charge, seated next to Deputy Minister Beshimov (responsible for CIS and International Organizations), engaged in a discussion of Russia's role in the region, which Beshimov described as "the 'Post-Soviet' Syndrome." He expressed relief that the day had gone without incident, and was especially pleased that the MFA had successfully shepherded the diplomatic corps and VIP delegations throughout the day. "We were really afraid we would lose someone," he shared. With a prayer from the mufti, the lunch-cum-dinner was over, ending the day's ceremonies. Kyrgyzstan had said farewell to its most famous son.

LITZENBERGER